

# HOW TO BE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE

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# A QUICK LOOK

## Introduction

By the year 2000, the majority of individuals served through the developmental disabilities system will be non-white and non-Anglo. As evidence of this, we have begun to see a growing presence of people from culturally diverse backgrounds in our communities. While we could speculate on the reasons for this growth, the more important issue is that we are moving away from the outdated “melting pot” America. As a result, we are moving into a society that will recognize and value diversity.

Changing, too, is the model for service delivery to people with developmental disabilities. One result of this change is the emergence of person-centered planning. As we prepare to move the system in the direction that will be focused more on an individualized or family centered approach, we will be challenged in many arenas. One of the biggest challenges we will encounter is how to appropriately respond to people who are influenced greatly by their cultural background which may be different from our own and uniquely diverse from others. We can best meet the challenge of responding to people within context of their own cultural background if we assist people in making realistic and relevant plans for their lives in a CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE way.

## WHO

Who does cultural responsiveness involve or affect? It involves and affects everyone who participates in the person-centered planning process. This includes consumers, family members, support people, friends, providers of service, co-workers, service coordinators, etc.

## WHY

*“People can be unbelievably naive when it comes to other cultures and other races”  
(Abigail Van Buren, The Sacramento Bee, June 24, 1995)*

To better understand WHY the issue of cultural responsiveness is so important, we can look at part of the 1992 amendment to the Lanterman Developmental Disabilities Services Act that addresses Individual Program Plans (IPP) and the person-centered planning process. One of the seven IPP requirements, which is found in Welfare and Institutions Code, Section 4646.5(a) states:

*“the activities of employees of the regional centers and service providers related to person-centered IPP’s shall reflect an awareness of, and sensitivity to, the lifestyle and cultural background of the consumer and family.”*

The culture in which a person lives impacts their attitudes, thoughts, feelings and actions, whether they have a developmental disability or not. Being able to bridge the gap between our own cultural background and the cultural background of the people we serve will: strengthen, support, and facilitate our role in assisting people as they plan their preferred future. There are many benefits in being culturally responsive. Among the benefits is the ability to:

- foster more understanding of the person and how the person operates, feels, and the ways in which they live their life,
- let people know they are thought of as individuals, as human beings,
- effectively communicate culturally sensitive choices and their consequences and
- be aware of many possibilities and respond appropriately.

The sum of these positive benefits is the ability to be responsive to the needs of individuals and their families as they make choices and plans, which often are based on a framework influenced by their cultural background.

### WHAT

*“One does not worship, display or teach culture; one acknowledges it as a whole way of life grounded in the past, and one necessarily lives a culture.”*  
*Houston Baker, Jr. (1990, p.1)*

People have many different opinions about what is cultural. For the purpose of this paper we will define what we believe culture to be, and what it means to respond to someone culturally.

A cultural group can be described as people with common origins, customs and styles of living, who share a sense of identity and language. Their common experiences shape their values, goals, expectations, beliefs, perceptions and behaviors. People belonging to a unique racial, ethnic, or religious group typically share a similar culture. Samoans are an example of a cultural group because most Samoans share the same origins, customs, language and religion.

We must keep in mind that although members of a group share similar traits, the need to see a person as an individual is paramount. The extent to which an individual differs from common cultural traits is regarded as the degree of their acculturation into “mainstream” America. Acculturation is the process and the degree by which a person keeps part of their old culture and takes on part of the new one. An example of this would be a person who takes on part of a new culture by eating with a knife and fork as opposed to eating with only their right hand.

There are many factors that may affect the acculturation experience:

- past experiences,
- time and method of immigration,
- socioeconomic status,
- how the family unit is regarded and
- ties to the cultural and mainstream community.

These factors can greatly influence someone’s view about the world and “where and with whom they want to live, who they want to socialize with, how they would like to spend their time, what jobs they want to have and other aspects of their daily life.” (Welfare and Institutions Code, Section 4502(j)).

## TIPS ON DEVELOPING CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

The following are some recommendations to get you started responding in a culturally responsive manner:

- **Become aware of your own cultural background.**

Think about it in terms of the values, beliefs, and customs of your culture and how these influence your attitude and behavior. Understanding one’s own culture is important because of the tendency to regard one’s own cultural group as the center of everything and the standard to which all others are compared. For example, take a look at the importance of punctuality as a part of your culture. Being “right on time” in some cultures may mean that one may arrive drastically before or after the appointed time.

- **Become convinced that just because someone else's customs and beliefs are different from yours, there are no right or wrong cultural beliefs.**

All beliefs and customs can be correct in the culture in which it occurs. In an individualized approach to planning, customs and beliefs should not be discounted as incorrect or improper. They should be discussed; maybe the differences could result in more choice and options.

- **Establish personalized contact with individuals and their families.**

Most people would like to believe they are a "name, not a number." Contact made in person or by telephone, often has more value than a letter or a form found in a mailbox.

- **Learn about the people that you serve.**

Gain and access information via community supports, churches and ethnic organizations. This is a great way to start building and maintaining a cultural information network.

- **Educate the community's culturally diverse leaders.**

Inform them about the issues, services and rights of individuals with developmental disabilities and their families. The leaders then become "spokespersons" and can disseminate information to the people in the community. Speaking to groups of leaders and preparing articles for culturally focused publications are among the many methods that can be used to reach community leaders.

- **Develop and use vocabulary of greetings and key phrases in the consumer's primary language.**

This can serve as an "ice breaker" and may make people feel more comfortable with you. It shows that you, at least, have taken time to enter into their world.

- **Become educated in cultural beliefs of the people you serve.**

This will broaden your ability to anticipate their reactions, including their reactions to your actions.

- **Assist consumers and families, to the extent possible, with issues other than those related to disabilities.**

You may find their concerns about “other” issues affect the way they think or feel about disabilities or services. In some cases, person-centered planning has been called “whole life planning.” This means that every area of one’s self is a part of the process. The ability to assist with other issues will reinforce the belief that consumers and families are real people with real life concerns.

- **Try to accommodate the needs of individuals.**

Keep in mind work schedules, transportation needs, religious or cultural holidays and child care arrangements when scheduling meetings, visits, etc.

- **Be sensitive to the person’s cultural perception of disability.**

Sometimes, beliefs about the cause of disabilities or perceptions about the issue of disabilities will determine the degree to which people will seek services and the type of services they value. For example, introducing the concept of independent living within a culture that equates a disability with total dependency could be a challenge. A family may believe that they are totally responsible for the needs of their family member with a disability.

- **If you are not proficient in someone’s native language, be sure to use a translator.**

The translator needs to have an understanding of the developmental disability system. Simplify jargon but not to the point of being insulting.

- **Try to discover some commonalities of experiences.**

This may be a hobby, styles of cooking, parenting secrets or anything that you and a consumer and/or a family member may have in common. Use these experiences to establish a “bond.” This will help you relate to people as individuals rather than as “clients.”

It is not possible to have an operating knowledge of every aspect of each person’s cultural background. Developing an awareness of, respect for, and sensitivity to people’s cultural background as they make choices and plan their lives, is what is important. This adds the dimension to person-centered planning that makes it really “PERSON-CENTERED.”

### General Information

In order to increase our awareness of the diversity among cultural groups, we've listed some information about how some members of cultural groups may think and feel about certain issues. This information might provide some insight and prove to be helpful in working with people from diverse backgrounds. Specific groups have purposely not been identified so that individuals are not stereotyped by their culture.

### Regarding Disabilities

#### **What some cultures believe about disabilities:**

- results from bad conduct by an individual or family member in this life or in a previous existence,
- caused by disobeying God,
- source of family embarrassment and shame,
- attributed to supernatural or natural causes,
- can attribute folk belief to cause of disabilities,
- public display of disability or weakness is discouraged,
- disabilities viewed with significant stigma and/or
- abandonment of a child with a disability sometimes occurs.

### Regarding Family

#### **How some cultures view families:**

- family defined by immediate and extended members (which may include several generations),
- grandparents may be responsible for rearing children,
- senior male is the head of the household,
- decision makers may be mother, father, chiefs or eldest family member,
- age determines hierarchy and authority in the family,
- children are controlled by parents, even in adulthood,
- a life long sense of moral obligation and loyalty to the family exists in order to maintain family name, honor and face and/or
- children are reared to live interdependently.

### Regarding Courtesies/Customs

**These are some cultural courtesies and customs:**

- gesturing for someone with your index finger is a sign of contempt,
- women do not traditionally shake hands with men,
- touching of a head is considered threatening or offensive,
- the number four can be translated into death even when combined with other numbers,
- only sit with feet uncrossed in front of elders,
- inappropriate to speak to the wife before you speak to the husband or
- calling an adult by their first name, without being given permission, is seen as a sign of disrespect.

### Conclusion

Hopefully, you will find some areas in this informational briefing that will help you move forward in recognizing and valuing diversity in everyone. It is through reading, studying, talking with others and sharing in the experiences of other cultural groups, that we can reshape our frame of reference. As a result our support of and response to people that we serve will be more appropriate and successful.

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